

“People”—Barbra Streisand (1964)

Added to the National Registry: 2016

Essay by Gwendolyn Thompkins (guest post)*



Original album cover



Label



Barbra Streisand

Anne Bancroft said no.

That’s how Barbra Streisand came to play the lead in the 1964 Broadway musical “Funny Girl.” And that’s how the world got to know “People”—a show-stopping ballad in the play’s first act.

Streisand sang other, bolder delights from the original score--“I’m the Greatest Star,” “Don’t Rain on My Parade,” “The Music That Makes Me Dance.” But the number most everyone remembers is “People.” Or, more specifically, most everyone remembers the song’s peculiar opening and closing counsel: “People, who need people, are the luckiest people in the world....”

Composer Jule Styne once asked lyricist Bob Merrill what the words to the song meant. “I don’t know,” Merrill reportedly said. “But it sounds good.”

More importantly, it sounds like Streisand--romantic, thoughtful, intense. “People” reflects her glorious voice--nimble and, yes, buttery--capable of beguiling intimacies and grand jetés of feeling. Styne wrote the music with Streisand in mind, saying, “I must have this voice!” And Merrill’s words, no matter how enigmatic, captured a universal truth about the human condition that Streisand (after she also inquired about the lyric) knew how to communicate. “People” was bespoke of the highest order. The song fit her perfectly because it was tailored that way. So was the rest of the “Funny Girl” score. And the Tony Award-winning Bancroft likely knew that when she reportedly said, “It’s not for me.”

Even as a teenager, Streisand’s voice seemed to have sprung fully-formed from some distant star. A natural reverberation bathes her sound with a magical quality. She pulls notes--taffy-like--across time and space. She lingers over syllables (“*pee PUUUUUHLLLL*”) unafraid of consonants. Untrained and somewhat resistant to training, she nonetheless sounds vaguely classical in her approach--the perfect diction, the frontal attacks on high notes, the breathing that makes more use of air than a paper plane. As a balladeer, she’s patient in her pacing, much like the late jazz pianist and singer Shirley Horn--a longtime favorite. (Miles Davis to Horn: “You do ‘em *awful* slow!”)

Streisand was 21 years-old when “Funny Girl” made its debut and already had three albums on the pop charts--“The Barbra Streisand Album,” “The Second Barbra Streisand Album” and “The Third Album.” In March 1964, Columbia Records released “People” as a single before “Funny

Girl” opened on Broadway--then watched the song vault up the “Billboard” 100 through the following June. Its success as a Top Five hit had theater-goers clamoring to match a persona with “... this voice!” They weren’t disappointed.

“Funny Girl,” tells the true-and-not-true story of comedian Fanny Brice--her ascent to fame at the turn of the last century and her brief and likely unfunny marriage to the professional gambler Nick Arnstein. But onstage, Streisand played Streisand--a Jewish wisecracker from Brooklyn: modern, feminine, smart, prodigiously talented and—frankly--bigger than Broadway. The cast recording, which Streisand dominated and Capitol released, won a Grammy Award for Best Show album. It featured Sydney Chaplin (son of Charlie) as Arnstein; Broadway veteran Kay Medford as Fanny’s mother, and Jean Stapleton as the card-playing neighbor Mrs. Strakosh (“When a girl isn’t pretty ...”).

Streisand’s fourth studio album--also released in 1964--was called “People.” The song anchored a playlist of unusual gems. The heart-breaking “Supper Time,” by Irving Berlin, was a ballad Ethel Waters sang in the 1930s. And “When in Rome (I Do as the Romans Do)” was a continental paean to romantic infidelity by Cy Coleman and Carolyn Leigh. Streisand had sly fun with the song, closing in Latin with, “Veni, vidi, vici,” (“*I came, I saw, I conquered*”). “People” was her first album to reach number one on the pop charts and earned Grammy Awards for Best Female Vocal Performance and Best Album Cover. Remember Don Bronstein’s photo? The beach? Streisand’s back to the camera? The sassy capris? The killer bob? The sun rising in the east? It remains one of her best.

Streisand left “Funny Girl” on Boxing Day in 1965 and never again performed on Broadway. From there, she made her film debut--as Fanny Brice, yet again, in the 1968 Hollywood musical “Funny Girl.” For that performance she won an Academy Award. On screen and in concert, “People” had become her signature. That is until “The Way We Were” in 1973 and the Academy Award-winning “Evergreen,” which she co-wrote, in 1976. Those songs are also synonymous with movies. But as Streisand has maintained throughout her career, the singing is secondary to the film work--a means to an end.

It’s somehow fitting that the success of “Funny Girl” and the breakaway hit “People” helped Streisand realize Hollywood stardom. Merrill and Styne had spent important songwriting years there. Merrill thrived in the 1950s with novelties like “If I’d Known You Were Coming I’d Have Baked a Cake,” “How Much is That Doggie In the Window?” and “Mambo Italiano.” He relished “wholesome” and “happy” tunes and they made him a heap of money.

“O.K., maybe my songs aren’t brilliant or witty,” Merrill said early in his career. “Maybe they will be forgotten tomorrow. But people do like them.”

Styne--a former vocal coach, band leader and inveterate gambler--quickly learned how to hedge his bets. A Hollywood musical, he knew, needs stand-alone songs that singers can turn into mainstream hits. So, in the 1930s and ‘40s, he packed his film scores with plenty of hit material --particularly for Frank Sinatra. In 1955, “Three Coins in the Fountain” won Styne and lyricist Sammy Cahn an Academy Award. He then applied the same strategy to Broadway with lyricists Leo Robin, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Stephen Sondheim and Merrill, among others. “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes” begat “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend.” “Bells Are Ringing” begat “Just in Time.” “Gypsy” begat “Let Me Entertain You.”

“Funny Girl” was no different--with one magnificent exception: “Not every day in the week do you hear Barbra Streisand,” Styne says in a 2005 National Public Radio documentary, marking the centennial of his birth. “And I went down to this little place in the Village where she was performing. I think I went 14 nights in a row. Just knocked me out.” Styne convinced “Funny Girl” producer Ray Stark, who was also Brice’s son-in-law, that she was the one.

It's hard to imagine anyone having to be convinced that Streisand would be good enough, especially after hearing her deliver the final lines of "People." As the third verse repeats, the song swells and its heartbeat appears to quicken. The arrangement gives Streisand a running start, and--in what seems to be one extraordinary gust--her voice glides up and up and up--fully extended. To what? To possibility.

*With one person, one very special person
A feeling deep in your soul
Says you were half, now you're whole
No more hunger and thirst
But first, be a person who needs pee-puuullll!
Peeee-pull who need pee-puuuuullll!
Are the LUCKiest people — in the world.*

At a Friars Club event paying tribute to Streisand in 1969, Styne recounted his experience with the play's producer, singing new lyrics to his standard "Time After Time":

*Time after time
I tell myself that I'm
So lucky to be Ju-lee Styne
When things seemed so dark
I walked up to Ray Stark
And I said, "Please meet a friend of mine"
(“Ray Stark — Barbra Streisand, Barbra Streisand —
Ray Stark”)*

*Ms. Streisand sang and I played
He said, 'She looks just like my maid'
Just you do your job and I'll do mine
Which just goes to show
How much producers know
He said, 'Belle Barth would be divine'
You all know the switch
The maid, she made him rich
For which, he hates Ju —leeeee Styne!*

Streisand released the send-up on her 1991 CD compilation "Just For the Record."

Since its debut, "People" has inspired any number of singers to perform and record the song--from Shirley Bassey and the plain-spoken Esther Phillips to Diana Ross and the Supremes. Nat "King" Cole covered "People," as did Little Anthony and the Imperials, Benny Goodman, Bill Evans, Sammy Davis, Jr., Ella Fitzgerald, George Benson, Michael Feinstein and Ahmad Jamal.

Even Streisand re-recorded "People"--most recently in 2016. She sang a live version in the key of G, as opposed to the original and more taxing A-major. But the intensity was still apparent in what Styne called that "beautiful instrument."

And yet--as of 2018--"Funny Girl" has never returned to Broadway. More than one effort to revive the musical has faltered, fixing Streisand in the popular imagination as the one who will always sing it best.

Of course, "People" may touch listeners for other reasons, as well. Its message of interconnectivity--that personal happiness hinges on psychological disarmament and also on human beings hanging together and not apart--is personal and communal. Bob Merrill may not

have been able to articulate the idea when Styne asked him what the words to the song meant. But Streisand, soaring above the orchestra for more than half a century, never loses sight of what the lyrics have to say. It may be her most profound song--as true today as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. People who need people may well be the "luckiest people in the world."

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.